Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 08-13-55
Week of March 24, 2008

CALVING SEASON – ARE YOU READY?

Calving is not one of those jobs that you can just put off for another day. For some producers, the calving season is already underway. Now is a good time to put together your strategy, supplies and equipment that will be needed during calving season.

Prior to calving season, develop a plan of what to do, when to do it, who to call for assistance (along with phone numbers) and when to intervene. Check that all family members or helpers are familiar with your plan, and post copies in convenient places. Consult your veterinarian about your protocol, and incorporate his/her suggestions.

Conduct a visual inspection of pens, chutes or calving stalls. Ensure all pens are clean, dry, safe and working properly. Move pregnant heifers and early calving cows to the calving area about two weeks before their due date. Check animals three to four times per day; heifers more often. Move healthy pairs out to large pastures three days after calving.

Is your calving kit ready? Contents should include: obstetrical sleeves, non-irritant antiseptic, lubricant, obstetrical chains (one 60-inch and/or two 30-inch chains), two obstetrical handles, mechanical calf pullers and injectable antibiotics. Are your instruments clean, sterile and ready to be used? What about ear tags? Do you have them made up, recorded in your calving book and ready to be applied? Do you have the proper needles, syringes, vitamins A, D and E, and colostrum on hand? Have handy a good flashlight, extra batteries and some old towels or a roll of paper towels for clean up.

Pack all the items into a five-gallon bucket or some other carrier so you can grab the complete calving kit at once. Another alternative is a small lunch cooler with a styrofoam bottom custom-cut to fit various-sized medication bottles. Make notes on your cows' calving and mothering skills. Note udder structure as well – this will jog your memory when looking to cull next fall.

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ALPACAS AN IDEAL INTRODUCTION TO LIVESTOCK CARE

When Stuart and Debbie Stilborn inherited the 25-acre family farm near Moosomin, they looked for a way to diversify their income. Because of their ease of care and low land requirement, alpacas provided the couple with an ideal introduction to livestock.

As the Stilborns were settling into farm life, the alpacas at the Canadian Western Agribition caught Stuart's interest. "He thought, 'They don't need much land, and we only have 25 acres. They're also pretty easy keepers,'" said Debbie Stilborn.

The suitable match encouraged the Stilborns to purchase their first four animals in May 1998. Since then, the Rainbow Alpaca Ranch herd has grown to 72 animals.

Most of the Stilborns' alpaca income is derived from the breeding stock. Their animals are registered with the Canadian Llama and Alpaca Registry and the international Alpaca Registry Incorporated.

Although they have award-winning alpacas with proven bloodlines, some animals have been sold as pets. Other animals have been sold as breeding stock to aspiring alpaca producers. A gelding and bred female combination provides an ideal starting point.

Many of the Stilborns' alpacas are sold within Saskatchewan, but they have also made sales in Manitoba and the United States. They are members of the Saskatchewan Alpaca Breeders' Network, and find that the community of breeders is fairly close-knit. There are 30 farms currently registered with the network, and there are other keepers who are not members of the network.

While breeding stock remains the Stilborns' main focus, fibre provides additional income, and that industry is experiencing growth. They are members of the Canadian Camelid Fibre Co-operative, an organization that controls quality and acts as an agent for its members in finding value-added opportunities. In 2007, the Stilborns sold their fibre to a quilting company in New Brunswick.

Although the Stilborn's consider the alpacas to be livestock, the animals' individual personalities tend to work their way into the family's hearts. Dusk is when the young cria (baby alpacas) come to life and begin stampeding around the pasture.

"They play a game of follow the leader, and it only takes one to get them all started," Stuart said. The pasture games, including pronking (bounding on all four legs like a deer) and leaping, provide entertainment for the family.

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The alpaca operation remains the Stilborns' only venture in agriculture, although they also seed 11 acres of their farm to hay in order to feed the stock. As the Stilborn teens look to move away to pursue post-secondary education, Debbie will likely reduce the size of the herd. Stuart works out of town during the week, and the children have played a vital role in the operation of the Rainbow Alpaca Ranch.

Debbie and Stuart don't foresee getting out of alpacas altogether, though. For a decade, the animals have provided a source of income, enjoyment and a network of friends.

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GRANT ENABLES TESTING OF NEWEST GRAIN CROP VARIETIES

Saskatchewan producers will once again have the opportunity to evaluate and compare the newest grain varieties for production on their farms.

This opportunity is made possible by an industry/government partnership. For 2008, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture has provided a $100,000 grant to the program.

The purpose of variety testing is to provide farmers with third-party information on yield data, agronomics, marketing factors and other matters. This information is presented in the *Varieties of Grain Crops* publication.

According to Blaine Recksiedler, Provincial Cereal Specialist, "The information allows producers to compare the newer varieties to a commonly grown check variety, and gives them a better idea of how the varieties will perform in their specific regions."

An entry fee system is used for variety testing, whereby the owners of a particular variety or companies with distribution rights pay a portion of the cost of having it tested.

The committee that administers the program is the Saskatchewan Variety Performance Group (SVPG). It is comprised of representatives from organizations with an interest in variety testing information. Public and private research institutions conduct the testing and collect the data.

"It has been indicated that producers value third-party variety testing information when making cropping decisions," Recksiedler said.

Testing requires several steps. First, trials are conducted using uniform protocols and standard check varieties. Second, data are collected from as many sites as possible and statistically analyzed. Third, results are aggregated over a number of years, on an area basis.

The results of the testing are then reviewed by the Saskatchewan Advisory Council on Grain Crops, which also updates disease and other agronomic information, and approves the data prior to publication.

SeCan Association administers the funding for SVPG. Plant breeders volunteer their time as crop co-ordinators, managing the data and providing expertise on their respective crops.

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Crops in the regional variety testing program include wheat, barley, oats and flax. However, the grant from the Ministry of Agriculture also provides support to organizations that test varieties of other crops, including canola, pulses, sunflower and canaryseed.

Variety information for all the crops is provided in the *Varieties of Grain Crops* publication that can be found on the Ministry of Agriculture website at www.agriculture.gov.sk.ca by clicking on the "Production" link, followed by "Crops – Seeding."

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TRICKS OF THE TRADE WHEN MARKETING RIDING HORSES

As the snow melts off the Prairies, many horse enthusiasts are turning their thoughts to the upcoming riding season. Equine enthusiasts from all disciplines and competitive levels will be marketing their animals to meet the needs of prospective buyers.

Adrienne Hanson, a Livestock Development Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture, says regardless of the training level, breed, discipline or pedigree of the animal, there are a few tips that will make the acquisition process smoother for both buyers and sellers.

"There are many websites and newspapers specializing in marketing horses that can maximize exposure to a specific target audience in an effective manner," Hanson noted.

The advertisement should be concise and accurate, outlining the horse's skills, ability, temperament, achievements and pedigree. "Potential purchasers will appreciate an honest and accurate assessment of the animal," she said.

Sellers will need to determine their asking price and tell buyers up front if they are willing to negotiate. Sellers should ensure they list a telephone number or Internet address at which they are readily accessible, and be available for questions or to co-ordinate viewing appointments.

Hanson says it is important that the buyers determine what they want and need in the horse. Assess the animal through e-mail and phone calls to define what is required in terms of purpose, breed, pedigree, training, temperament and price, prior to travelling for viewing and negotiations. The prospective purchaser should inspect the horse carefully and, in some circumstances, may want to arrange a pre-sale veterinary inspection for a full inventory of the horse's physical condition.

If the animal is not appropriate for the buyer's purposes at first glance, or if the mount appears ill or unsafe, the prospective purchaser should politely thank the seller and depart. "In most cases, the seller will respect your consideration in saving their time," Hanson said.

"The bottom line when buying or selling a horse is that honesty and openness is important, as in any arrangement where an item or service is being purchased," Hanson said. "The sellers maintain their professional reputation by properly presenting an animal for sale, and the purchasers obtain an optimal product to use and enjoy."

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